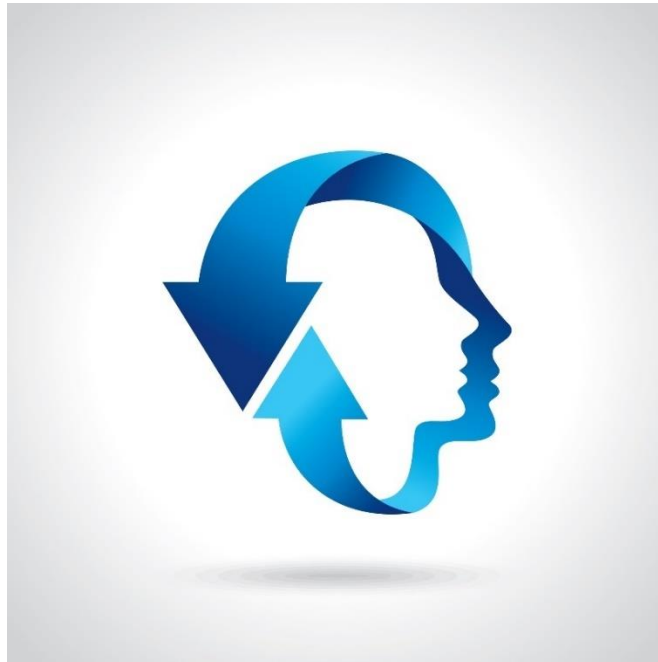# The Mind Behind

Why do people make the choices they do?

by Dr. Langbourne Rust

I've spent my career trying get inside kids heads, trying to figure out why they make they choices they do. Over the years I have pulled together a model of the child choice-making mind: a model of the internal processing that steers them through life. And lo and behold: it looks like this mind lies behind a lot of adult choices, too, and once you understand it, a lot of grownup behavior will make more sense.

Contents

Choices, not decisions

I need to stress that my topic is choices not "decision making". I want to understand whatever people do when alternatives are available -- whether they see them or not.

They could have taken another road at the fork,
- picked up another product from the shelf,
- prepared for a different career,
- stopped doing what they were currently doing,
- or started doing something else …

  whether or not they stopped to think about what they were doing.

It is important not to confuse these terms: "Choices" are events. "Decisions" are deliberative processes. Choices get made all the time. Few of them result from thoughtful decisions.

One brain, several minds

As I have come to see it, we are, all of us, creatures of several minds.

We have alternate systems for making sense of the world around us and structuring what we do. At any one time, one or another of these minds is in control.

Not full-formed at birth

It should be obvious that, unlike Athena we don't start life with an adult mind – or armor. In fact, we start off with little or no internal representation of an external world at all.
It is over time that we construct and shape one model of the world after another.
- as we gain experience in life,
- mature neurologically
- and confront challenges that the earlier-formed minds can't handle.

The main point is that earlier minds never go away. They stay in charge of the things they do well.

When it comes to making choices, two minds pay especially important roles. The abstract, deliberative mind is the one we usually think of. But there is another one that plays a pivotal role, and works in a very different way. It is what I am calling "The Mind Behind"

The other choosing mind

A great deal of the time, the mind managing our daily choices is a one-track navigation-oriented mind: a mind of recognition, targeting, steering and action. This kind of mind is extremely efficient and effective at managing everyday life. It takes up little bandwidth and it directs us to actions whose consequences are predictable and safe.

The very efficiency of this mind, however, its ability to run in the background, makes it nearly invisible to introspective thought.

A mind of things

As we came out of infancy we began to construct a representation of the outside world inside our minds that lets us access things without their being physically present.

The worlds we first internalize are physical worlds composed of physical objects and actions – what developmental psychologists call "concrete" things. A "thing" in this kind of mind is a unitary mental structure.

Things are known by recognition, not by diagnosis, not by an intersection of attribute values. The "it" is known to consciousness before its attributes can even be conceived:

> You see something, you recognize it. You know it. You feel it.
> You know what to do with it.

Origins

One of the great developmental milestones in life is a child's invention of object constancy. Any parent will tell you how exciting it was to see their baby give her first smile of recognition.
It is an even greater rush to the child, and a sign that she is assembling a mental model of the world, a mind in which the parent is a permanent part.

Later on, when she forms identities for OTHER things around her, she gives that same sign: a smile.

Well, guess what?

Recognizing things is hugely rewarding. It is a primal feeling. The emotional rush of recognizing things drives us to continue filling our minds with thing-identities for the rest of our lives.

I owe you a full confession here: I am a birdwatcher. I love going out to find birds I recognize, and learning to recognize new ones. I need no higher justification than that. It is basic fun. And yes, when I see a bird I know – a SharpShinned Hawk, say, or a Bufflehead duck – I smile.

Actions and identity

The very first identities a child learns are grounded in physical actions.
A baby recognizing the spoon pushes his lips forward the same way every time he sees it.
A favored toy hammer triggers a shaking of a closed fist.
A thing's identity is rooted in the physical action it is known by. A thing is known by what you do with it.

What is a hat, I ask you?
This little girl holding a bowl on her head knows.
Her action shows us clearly what she saw this thing to be.
And you thought it was a bowl of spaghetti!

My larger point here is that our early-formed minds determine what is most fundamental in the experiences and behavior of all of us.

The Mind Behind
To reinforce three key points:

- *It is always there*. These experiences are always with us. This mind structures what we recognize, what we feel and what we choose for the rest of our lives.
- *Recognition is intrinsically rewarding*.
  - You smile when you spot an acquaintance in the crowd – even if you never really liked him very much.
  - You see the jacket of a book you read as a child and it warms you all over.
  - A plotline turns in the direction you were expecting: you just knew she was the murderer all along. Heh heh heh.
  - You hear the first three notes of a tune and you know what song it is.

  All of life is enriched by recognition of the familiar.
- *Physical action is at the heart of identity*.

The single-item pipeline

The most basic type of mind-of-things can focus on only one thing at a time.
It is like looking at the world through a peephole or a telescope. As soon as another thing is noticed, the first one goes out of frame and disappears.

There can never be two things in mind at the same time … so this mind can't compare things. And if it can't compare, it can't discover attributes. And it is incapable of sustaining the concept of "similarity."

To this mind, things either exist or they do not. "Same" means the "same thing". Not "Same kind of thing"

The blur of everyday life

Think of going down an aisle in a supermarket when you are cruising along, steering by this mind.
If you go past something you've never seen before, you don't notice it.
It is not a thing. It is just a part of the blur: a muddle of un-parsed experience that holds no meaning or expectation.

You keep scanning for something you do know. You don't see non-its. But then something catches your eye – something you recognize, something top-of-mind, or maybe something that you were looking for.

When you recognize something, it pops from the background.
At that moment, it occupies your whole mind. You focus on it, approach it, and unless some thought or distraction interrupts you, you make contact with it and do your thing (its thing) with it. Your mind never even sees the items that surround it.

The Orienting Reflex

This is exactly what Ivan Pavlov and his colleagues in Russia studied in the early 20th century.

They called it the "orienting reflex" – it is a complex series of interrelated, coordinated behaviors that can be observed across the animal kingdom. Fish, spiders, dogs, children and grownups all exhibit it.

When it is triggered, the organism looks at the target, aligns bilaterally, approaches, contacts, and tries to consume it.

In the hundreds of hours I spent watching kids in supermarkets, restaurants and toy stores, I saw this orienting reflex over and over again. And I saw it was completely dependent on recognition. Without recognition, a thing wouldn't exist within a kid's minds. There would have been no targets at all.

Watch kids shopping

Look at young kids in a store some time.

You won't see many of them making conscious decisions about what to get. They aren't evaluating pros and cons.

Kids act more like guided missiles: They cruise along until their eyes pick up a recognized target and they zero in on it. Once they have locked onto a target, once their orienting reflex has been triggered, that target fills their mind entirely. Everything else vanishes. They are, psychologically consumed by the thing they are aiming to consume.

Watch grownups shopping

Now look at grownups in stores.
A lot of the time, you will see the same behavior.
A lot of the choices they make are made in this frame of mind - navigating – not deciding. Like whenever people are in a cluttered choice environment –

- a big-box store,
- a boutique,
- a city sidewalk,
- a shopping website,
- a magazine page
- or when their mind is primarily occupied with other activities –

they act just like the child does: Their old targeting control system steers them.

Then, if they find nothing they recognize and are temporarily paralyzed, they call on their decision-making, diagnostic mind to help them out and give them a line of action.

But most of the time, they don't make a thoughtful choice.
They just keep cruising until they spot a thing.
The first thing they spot. The thing that pops out of the background.
They fix it in their crosshairs, And zero in.

The background mind, the mind behind, does all the work.

Autopilot minds

One great feature of this basic, concrete thing-choosing mind is that once it has been well established, it can run on autopilot – like a Tesla or Google self-driving car.

It can run in parallel with the Mind In Front, leaving it to go off thinking and fantasizing about work or social life or whatever, while the mind-behind manages navigation – and choice – in the physical world.

It's workings, though, are invisible to the analytical mind. It is really hard to think about what you don't think about. It is hard to focus on background. After all, once you focus on it, it is no longer background. It's like asking someone, "What are you not thinking about?"

When you ask someone for reasons, preferences or motivations, they will usually think of what they actually do and create a plausible explanation of what their thought processes might have been. They produce excuses for what they've done.

Expressed preferences lag behavior

This is what I took from Andrew Ehrenberg's research discovery that changes in brand preferences were a lagging indicator of changes in market share.

Behavior changes first. What people report to researchers never quite catches up.

Most marketing research, and most economics, and most advertising, and most self-help advice, most surveys, and most political polls, assume the reflective, introspective mind. They miss this other mind: the mind that so often determines what people see and do and feel and choose in the stream of everyday life.

Conscious, but not self-aware

Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Prize-winner, made a
telling remark in his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow,*

> "Odd as it may seem, I am my remembering
> self,and the experiencing self, who does my
> living, is like a stranger to me"

It is not a stranger to me: it is the concrete mind he developed in childhood and that
steers him throughout his life: his Mind Behind

Kahneman concluded as I did that there are at least 2 minds at work behind our choices.
He called them System 1 and System 2 (smithing words was not his profession). His
focus was explicitly on decision making and he has much to say about the conditions that
shape and distort it. I strongly recommend it to anyone seeking to understand the
psychologies of the decision-making realm of choice behavior.

More about this Mind Behind …

When I do new-product interviews with kids, I often give them a choice at the end of a
session: they can take home one thing: either the new one we'd been talking about, or one
I knew to be the one they usually have.

They invariably choose their old-familiar, … even if they'd said they loved the new one.
They steer to what they know best.

Grownups on autopilot steer this way, too. Only when something gets them to turn on
their analysis minds do they start making comparisons and looking at attributes and
anticipating what an experience will be like
.
Out there in the real world, that doesn't often happen.
Time and time again, Familiarity trumps valuation – and novel things lose.

Novelty – everyone's issue

Here is the problem. If mind can only fix on familiar, recognizable things, how do people react when presented with a new thing? The answer is that they usually don't.

Mark H. McCormack, founder of IMG, came up with one of my favorite quotes

"All things being equal, people will do business with a friend; and all things being unequal, people will still do business with a friend."

What can get concrete minds to focus on something they don't know? How can you introduce a new thing? Practitioners have developed a few good ways by trial and error, not from theory. But the tried and true methods make good sense in light of the theory of the Mind Behind.

Ways to get known to the Mind Behind

One proven strategy is Perceptual isolation – Display your new product without distractions or clutter to draw attention away from it.

Think
- spotlight or
- end-aisle displays or
- movie theater trailers –

These help to establish an entity in a concrete mind – to get the mind to notice something by having nothing more familiar there to grab attention away.

Direct commands – especially from a familiar character (and especially one of higher status).

People learn very early in life to pay attention to grownups telling them what to do. They may not obey, but they do notice.

Use physical demonstration –

When you want to reach a concrete mind with something new, make the introduction as concrete as possible. Think …

- "Physical"
- "Action"
- "Demonstration"
- "Sensory experience"
- "Familiar elements"

To the abstract mind, the Mind In Front, credibility may be important, but to the Mind Behind, recognition is all that matters.

If your product isn't familiar, you can paste on things that are -

Thus the kid who sees a bathrobe with Ninja Turtles on it zeroes in on the Ninja Turtles and wants to get it.

But Note: the Ninja Turtles are key …and it can't be something similar to them.

The Concrete navigation mind fixes on identities, not similarities.

Some other turtle will not do – even if she's on a skateboard and is cute as she can be..

In the mind of the child consumer, the Ninja Turtle is what is seen, steered towards and chosen. Not a generic turtle, and not the soft green bathrobe which is only the frame and comes along for the ride.

And keep exposing it over and over - familiarity is incredibly powerful, Keep showing people something – and ideally show it in different contexts and different media. Remember the Baby Sitters Club?

They did an outstandingly successful job at exposing the brand – as books, as TV shows, as clubs, as clothing.
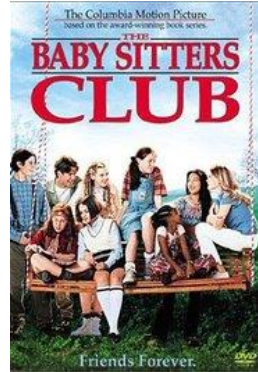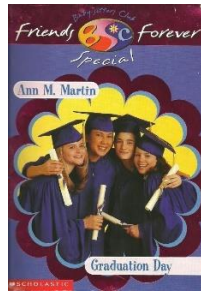
The "triangulation" of an entity goes a very long way towards building it as an independent, solid mental structure that would serve as a future target for the navigating minds of their consumers.

Synergy and Recency

Bill Harvey, in a speech in the Market Research Council in October, 2016, made the same point, coming from a different evidence base:


He reported a massive improvement in the results of advertising programs when they were run in multiple venues, and he found a major lift in sales as a function of recency of exposure.

I'd warrant a guess that the consumer behavior he was tracking was being managed by people in steering mode, under the direction of their Mind Behind.

Psychology of Brand

I recently did a Google search for definitions of a brand, and the definitions were all over the lot. It started to to look to me like the only really consistent meaning of a brand that people could agree on was an institutional one: a brand is a brand group or a budget line in a company.
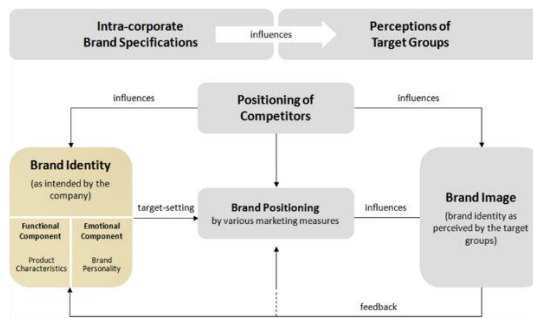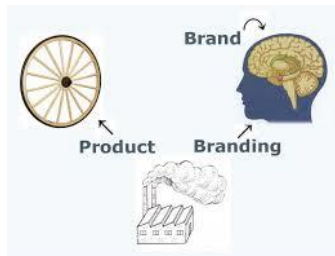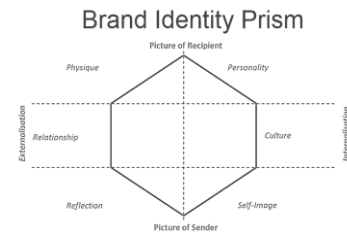
The problem comes from trying to define brands in the framework of an analytical mind.
And the fit is not good. But from the perspective of the Mind Behind, it is no puzzle.
A brand is an it, a thing, a target. Full stop.
It is the primary structure for a mind in steering mode.

Why do people choose lesser-liked products?

If you ask people to rate the flavors in a blind taste test, Pepsi usually outscores Coke. But it doesn't outsell it in the marketplace. Take the blindfold off, and more blind-taste-test responds will reach for Coke.

Think about which mind does a lot of the real-world choosing.
A concrete mind only chooses things it recognizes, so the result makes sense.
The objectively off-taste of Coke is actually an asset to this mind: It makes Coke even more unique and identifiable.

So if you are trying to sell to people, many of whom will be making their choices on autopilot, maybe you should put more effort into getting recognized and familiar rather than into optimizing pleasure scores for the last few point on attribute rating scales.

Strange foods

Ever wonder why many Americans find Jalapeno peppers intolerable when Mexicans love them so?

And Vietnamese fermented fish paste?
And stinky French cheeses?
And Wasabi?
And Lutefisk?

Children in their native cultures don't like them either - at first. It takes them time and tears to tolerate them. But once they do, nothing else can substitute.

Recognition is so powerful that it often overrides the physiological pleasure-senses. These taste preferences – so strong and so rigid, are the result of a mind that targets familiar things. And the choosing is saturated with feeling. There is no abstract separation of judgment and feeling in the Mind Behind.

Emotion

A case in point:
My mother used to wear this perfume. Shalimar.

A year or so after Mom died, I was giving a quick hug to a colleague who was moving to another city. I got a whiff of that exact same scent.

Bam! It hit me like a hammer The upwelling of pure emotion was almost unbearable. I wanted to keep clinging to her – even though we were standing in the middle of Fifth Avenue and the light had just changed.
This was pure, unreasoned, visceral emotion. The three-year old inside me had taken full charge of my being. And it was wonderful.

Objectively great sensories are fine to have in a product, and bad ones are marketplace death, but a recognized and familiar taste will get chosen more often, and will be experienced more emotionally by the consumer.

The two choosing minds

The Mind Behind has no thought/feeling separation. It is unlike the abstract mind which separates thought from emotion.

Abstract thought is great thing. It is the foundation of science, and civilization, too. This mind is free to float freely and construct objective models of the world, without triggering every behavior that comes to mind.

But things and events lose their uniqueness and experience gets reduced to information. The more a person lives in the abstract, socialized, adult world, the less they get to experience things in the way they used to: fully present, fully vivid, saturated with emotion. The way all life was as a child.

People miss it, and they look for ways to recapture it. For the rest of their lives.

Pure feeling

One way is to hang out with kids.
I'll never forget an interview with a mom and her 3-year-old daughter. The session was over, the mom was holding her daughter – cheek to cheek – looking at me.

I told the little girl that the lady at the desk outside had a present for her.
And Mom, instantly, shrieked out: "WOW!! Jessica do you hear that? A PRESENT!"

Think about that. If I'd just been talking to the mom alone, there was nothing I could have said that would have sparked an outburst like that. But now, through her child, that mom had access to an experience of a total, overwhelming and literally child-like sort. No social inhibitions got in her way, no multiple points of view to accommodate. Just a single firehose of feeling.
And she let it rip.

Being with her kid she
      1) felt life through her kid and
      2) had license to be an asshole again.

Well, kids are one channel we oversocialized old bores can use to recapture that kind of experience.

But there are others.

- Pets

- Spectator Sports

And also

- Music,

- Booze,

- Drugs,

- Sex

- And many, many others

They all offer the promise of experiencing life again at an emotional, diffuse, and total level. And the cost-benefit analysis and price sensitivity dynamics of the mind you want to escape just don't click in.

Notice how these activities all demonstrate the dominance of familiarity over rational evaluation to the Mind Behind
- How else could there have been Cubs Fans for all of those years?
- How could some people love their nasty, ugly, smelly dysfunctional pets as much as they do?
- How could some become so rigidly loyal to such simple-minded, boring music being banged out by obviously limited 3-chord musicians who have only one volume setting?

The answers, by now, should be pretty clear: people do these things because they let them feel things that their more rational states of mind are incapable of feeling.
You might notice, too, how these open-gates to childlike emotion drive so many of our economy's biggest industries.

Mind versus Brain

Minds are a lot more than brains. Brains are physical organs. Minds are our models of the worlds we live in.

I was trying to find out why some kids became such fanatic Lego players. One of the interviews was with Zach.

Yes, Zach told me, he really loved Lego. But he wasn't playing with them as much as he used to. You see, he used to have his own bedroom. And whenever he got bored he'd see all his models set up around the room and the boxes of pieces on the floor and he'd set to building something new.

But now his little brother had moved into the room.

His mom made Zach put his models away and hide the boxes in the closet. So now, when he comes into the room and doesn't see them, he doesn't think of them. He sees the TV. He hardly plays with Lego any more.

Out of sight, out of mind., and what is in sight is what is in mind – for kids and for the mind behind in grownups.

So start to think outside the brain box. Changing people's minds is not just changing their thoughts, it is changing their worlds … physical worlds and social, too … for which I recommend the brilliant work of Lev Vygotsky.

Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner

Vygotsky blew apart my traditional view of mind as brain and opened me to the idea of mind as encompassing the entire social-cultural surround of a person.

When he died in 1934 at the age of 37 his works were suppressed in Russia and didn't become known in the West until the late 1950's due in large part to the efforts of Jerome Bruner, who introduced me to them in the early 1960's – in an undergraduate course in cognitive development that excited me to the point where I pivoted my career into psychology.

It was then that I got introduced to the exciting work of two other seminal thinkers about cognitive development Jean Piaget and Heinz Werner

Jean Piaget

Jean Piaget's stage theory of cognitive development should be required reading of anyone seeking to understand the various ways minds make sense of the world.

But his work should be read with a warning: He was seeking to understand how children's highest-level thinking develops from one model to the next … what kids under ideal circumstances are capable of.

Many have interpreted his work as a showing linear model of cognitive change over time. And our social and educational institutions reinforce that impression.
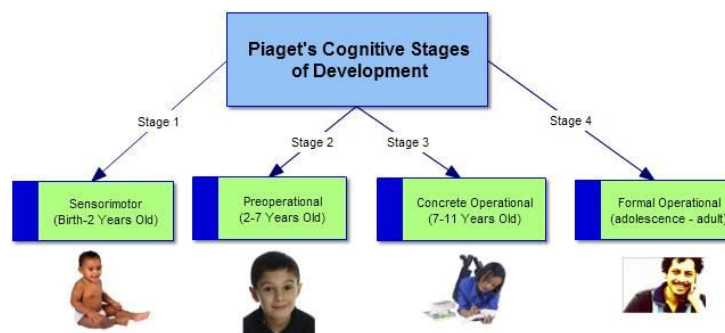
Babies become kids become teens become grownups
Preschoolers become Primary schoolers, then Middle schoolers, then High schoolers.
But that is not what happens. And Piaget never framed it that way. His actually was a model of the progressive development of maximum-abilities.

So his findings need to be adapted and reshaped to the challenge of understanding everyday functioning in the real world.
Mental development is cumulative, not serial.
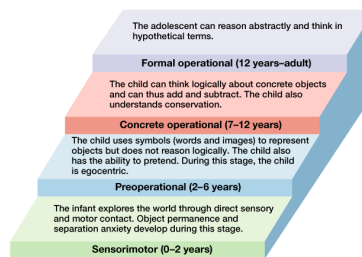
If you want to know how people make choices most of the time in everyday life, or how our different minds take over control in one situation or the next. You need a different model. You need to a model of cognitive development is cumulative.
Each mind grows from and exists alongside the previously-developed minds.

And, as I've pointed out before, when one mind manages a realm of experience well, it continues doing so for the rest of your life.

Heinz Werner

Another theorist of astonishing breadth is Heinz Werner whose nearly impenetrable book, "The Comparative Psychology of Mental Development" blew the top of my head off in graduate school. I was blessed to have one of his students from Clark University, George Rand, to help me understand it.

Werner jolted me out of my unquestioned assumption that learning was a matter of linking together separate perceptions …and helped me to see that a lot cognitive development involves creating structure out of nothings. This is absolutely critical if you want to understand how the Mind Behind makes sense of the world.
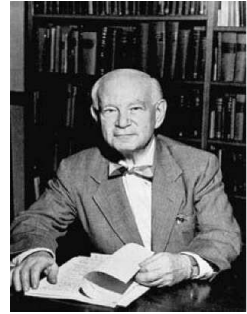
Abstract versus Concrete Minds

So here, with a more than nod to the great thinking of these outstanding theorists, is a thumbnail comparison of the structure and functioning of the two minds most involved in everyday choice making.

Abstract Mind
- Dispassionate, distanced, unlink thought & action
- Comparative: Attributes, similarities, scales
- Expectations
- Valuations, judgments
- Deliberative, intentional
- Flexible, stable

Concrete Mind
- Holistic and intense …. Image, emotion, action together
- One-thing-at-a-time
- Recognition dependent
- Familiarity
- Steering, aiming
- Spontaneous, reactive
- Rigid, brittle

A bit more clarity

There are lots of mysteries that seem not so mysterious once you recognize how the concrete choice-making mind directs so much human experience. Here are a number of topics that I've understood better as I've come to appreciate the way the choice-navigating mind works. I will take them up in a later series of papers.

Why people smoke
Self-identity
How plots work
Fear of the dark
Why so many shots go straight to the goalie
Cleaning up (or not)
How names work
What does "liking" mean
Smiling at Picasso
Media vs copy in advertising
The real consumer
Sex and violence
How to do better research
Defining myself by what I like

And what about Trump?

His election victory is a bit less puzzling if you recognize that significant numbers of voters were "choosing" him from a concrete frame of mind, their Mind Behind, not making "decisions" with their abstract reasoning Mind in Front.

And the reason they were operating with that frame in mind was that they were living their lives under a lot of stress. Stress reduces available bandwidth and makes complex thinking harder and harder. Kurt Lewin, David Brown and others pointed out the phenomenon years ago and expressed it as "Frustration results in regression."

It seems to me, that for this disaffected segment of the voting population, a lot of Hillary's messaging fueled the attraction to Trump. She ramped up people's fear, she swamped their bandwidth with information overload, and ended up making Trump more of an entity (a target to the steering mind) while making herself less of one.

His story, his character, his base humor and shoot-from-the-hip style made him ever more concrete, anecdotal, personal and human. While she disappeared under a montage of abstract plans, thoughts, facts and reasons.

That, combined with the incessant media coverage, made him more and more familiar. And as I've pointed out, familiarity trumps evaluation, and recognition steers choosing, in the Mind Behind.

Detecting the concrete mind

How do you tell which mind is dominant at one point or another in a person or in a population group? I only have hunches at this point, but here are some of the likely tells:

- Emotion
- Distress
- Diffusion/dedifferentiation (Kurt Lewin et al.)
- Intensity
- Spontaneity
- Rigidity
- Physicality
- Familiarity-seeking

And maybe people who choose the "undecided" option on a survey question are more likely to choose something in a concrete frame of minds.
And maybe we should look for indices of stress.
Maybe some physiological or behavioral measures will help: like pupil dilation or eye-movement or T-Scopes, or blood pressure or galvanic skin response.
For if we can tell which mind is in charge, we will know a lot more about how choices will be made.

So much more to learn

There is so much more to learn.
- What more can we learn about the orienting response?
- How do our different minds evolve?
- How do they interact?
- What triggers one or the other to take command?
- The roles of still earlier minds
- What measures, concepts, theories do we need?

The goal?

To better understand our societies, our industries, our children and our selves by injecting another level of human experience into our models of who they are.

And to let the kid inside each of us get out more often.

Thank you

We both thank you for your attention.
But for different reasons

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Image credits